

## **Senior Oral Exam Topics List, with Sample Questions** **America Field, example 1**

### **Topic I. Representation and the Post-Traumatic Imagination**

Art Spiegelman, *Maus I and II* (1987)

Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994)

Toni Morrison, "The Dead of September 11" (2001)

Suheir Hammad, "First Writing Since..." (2001)

Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (2007)

Nam Le, "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" (2008)

Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, (2001): ch. 1

Michael Rothberg, " 'There Is No Poetry In This': Writing, Trauma, and Home." *Trauma at Home* (2003)

### **SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. How are you defining "trauma" here? What makes for a "post"-traumatic experience? What is the relationship between trauma and imagination?
2. In this category, you have sources that refer to or re-imagine the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and 9/11. How do you distinguish between these historical events as "traumatic"? What was traumatic in each case and for whom?
3. What are the actual historical events that inspired O'Brien's novel?
4. Compare the formal structures of these poems. How does each poet's choice of form connect to/help communicate the poem's themes?

**Topic II. Declaring Independence: Forming a More Perfect Union**

Declaration of Independence (1776)

David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829)

Declaration of Rights and Sentiments (1848)

Jane Swisshelm, “Women’s Rights and the Color Question” (1850)

Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (1852)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)

Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1992)

Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (1986)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. How does Uncle Tom’s Cabin fit into a category entitled “Declaring Independence”?
2. Compare the rhetorical strategies of the Declaration of Independence, Walker’s Appeal, and the Declaration of Sentiments. How do they make their claims for rights?
3. What is the occasion for Douglass’s speech in 1852? What recent events concerning slavery may have informed the speech?
4. How would you characterize the differences between Bailyn’s and Nash’s interpretations of the American Revolution?

**Topic III. Class and Social Responsibility From the Gilded Age to the 1920s**

William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe To Each Other* (1883)

Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)

Jane Addams, “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910)

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925)

[images from] Arnold Lewis, James Turner, et. al., *The Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age* (1987)

Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1990)

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899): Chapter 7

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. What do you mean by “class” here? Is this an economic category? A social category? A cultural category? Some combination of these?
2. Literary historians typically date the shift from realism to modernism in the period you’ve bracketed with your topic. Are your two literary texts—*Gatsby* and *Bread Givers*, both published in 1925—formally consistent with this literary historical periodization? Why or why not?
3. What aspects of immigration in 1890 were of concern to Jacob Riis, who was himself a Danish immigrant?
4. How does the form of Addams’s autobiography craft connections between her private life and her public concerns?
5. How would Veblen fit into this category as a primary source?

Transitional Question: What’s the relationship between the conception of self in *The Great Gatsby* and Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*?

**Topic IV. The Imperial “I”**

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791)

[series of five paintings] Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire* (1833-36)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841)

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)

Emily Dickinson, “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” (1890), “The Soul Unto Itself” (1891)

R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955)

Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (1993)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. Is the imperial “I” necessarily male?
2. Emerson, Melville, and Dickinson are associated with the literary historical period known as the American Renaissance. What was that and how does it connect to notions of an American character?
3. What constituted the American “empire” at the time that Cole painted “The Course of Empire”?
4. How does Harriet Jacobs appropriate the conventions of the sentimental novel in *Incidents*?

Transitional Question: How would you compare Ishmael’s “I” in *Moby Dick* to Humbert Humbert’s “I” in *Lolita*? To what ends do Melville and Nabokov use the first person point-of-view in their novels?

**Topic V. Ways of Seeing: Gender and the Gaze**

Mary Cassatt, "At The Opera" (1878)

Edith Wharton, *House of Mirth* (1905)

Claude McKay, "If We Must Die" (1919), "The Lynching" (1922)

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955)

Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (2004)

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1984), ch. 1-3

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. Is the gaze singular and trans-historical, or do you have an account of change over time in this category?
2. How is the gaze gendered? Do any of the texts in this category challenge the gendering of the gaze? If so, how and in what ways? Alternately, does Cassatt's painting challenge the gendering of the gaze? Or, how do McKay's poems participate (or not) in a gendered gaze?
3. What is the form of McKay's poems? What is the significance of choosing to use this form?
4. What marks *The Feminine Mystique* as a text of the Cold War period?